

Finding A Tool: Technology Grunts 1

**Designing For The Workplace:
Part 2: Finding A Tool
Connecting the Technology Grunts
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Finding A Tool: Connecting The Technology Grunts

The technology coordinators of my district are a valuable resource in need of the benefits of community in order to successfully accomplish their mission. My project will look for ways to bring the undervalued technology coordinators together, to give them voice and help them develop strategies to do their job or change it if the well-intended restrictions get in the way of their over-all function as educators.

Accessing the Need

As previously described my intended group are the technology coordinators of my district. As a group they are computer-savvy educators with overly crowded teaching schedules, more requests to fix someone's computer hardware/software problem than hours in the day, and shrinking or none-existent budgets to maintain much less grow their technology resources. Consequently the technology tool intended to help support this group will need to be free (open-source), because of the coordinators' overly filled schedule the tool will need to be accessible anytime/anyplace, and require virtually no training for the end-users. The tool will also need to be password protected in order to maintain the integrity of the intended community (the tech coordinators of this one district). To promote the needed honest voicing of concerns and complaints the tool will also need to allow the user to determine the level of anonymity while posting or using the tool. The basic idea is for the tool to assist in the creation of community by promoting dialog and encouraging the sharing of strengths and needs among themselves.

The Right Tool for the Right Job

There were numerous web tools in the Open Source community, of varying levels of complexity that could meet the needs of this job. On one end of the spectrum was a web-tool called Bloki, which, as the name implies, is a cross between a Blog and a Wiki. According to the

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Comment: Hmm, a peer to peer solution eh? What about also finding some connection to sources outside the district? Even if this is just one guy's job as 'broker' for the group?

company hosting the service, Zapatec, “**Bloki**, is a Web site on which you can create Web pages, publish a blog, and host online discussions, right in your browser -- with no additional software required. Think of it as a word processor for the Web.” Beyond the typical blog features of posting articles and responding comments, the service also has a “forums” feature, which would support a more community-based dialogue and make the articles/submissions more accessible than a traditional blogs’ organizational method. The downside is that the product is completely hosted by Zapatec and therefore future usage, possible future fees and control of content would be subject to the viability and policies of the hosting company. It also not known if the creating and responding features of the blog will be accessible behind my district’s firewall.

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Comment: That’s a new one on me. URL?

On the more complex end of the spectrum of tools considered is the portal package, Geeklog. Unlike Bloki, this tool would require that I provide or find the physical server needed to host the tool. If I were to do the installation on my own, I would also need to have some working knowledge of web-databases such as MySQL and the scripting language, PHP. This level of complexity would also provide an equivalent level of control and being less at the whim of a host company. What Bloki offers in a more generic form, Geeklog offers with whatever level of customization one can bring to the project. According to Geeklog’s documentation it “allows you to create your own virtual community area, complete with user administration, story posting, messaging, comments, polls, calendar, weblinks, and more!” The documentation lists the following eleven features:

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Comment: These are all very critical questions to be answered before you head out there with a solution. Perhaps next time I should have folks generate specs and write an RFI (request for information) and send it out to vendors/sources.

- User-system, allowing members of the public to register for your site and submit stories.
- Comment system, allowing users to comment on posts made to your site.
- Block system, allowing you to put information anywhere on your site.
- Plugin system that allows you to extend Geeklog, without having to code any new PHP.

- Theme system that allows users to select what layout they want to view.
- Excellent security model that allows you to give users control over certain aspects of the site with no need to worry.
- Site Statistics that show you the most popular areas of your site.
- Link system that allows users to add links to the site.
- Calendar System that lets you and your user add up-and-coming events.
- Allow users to email stories to their friends.

Albeit, much more difficult to implement, Geeklog seems to be a more complete solution to my design to provide a means to create support for the technology coordinators in my school district.

As with Bloki, it is unknown whether the chat features will function behind my district's firewall.

Conclusion

I'm hoping that implementing Geeklog will address the design of my project to look for ways to bring the undervalued technology coordinators together, to give them voice and help them develop strategies to do their job or change it if the well-intended restrictions get in the way of their over-all function as educators.

Ipolin 3/24/05 7:08 AM

Comment: Yeah, the more I look at our uses of Geeklog the more I like the product. Besides, you're tech guys, you can stretch a little to get the expertise up to speed.

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